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A Short History: Foundation of the Safavid State

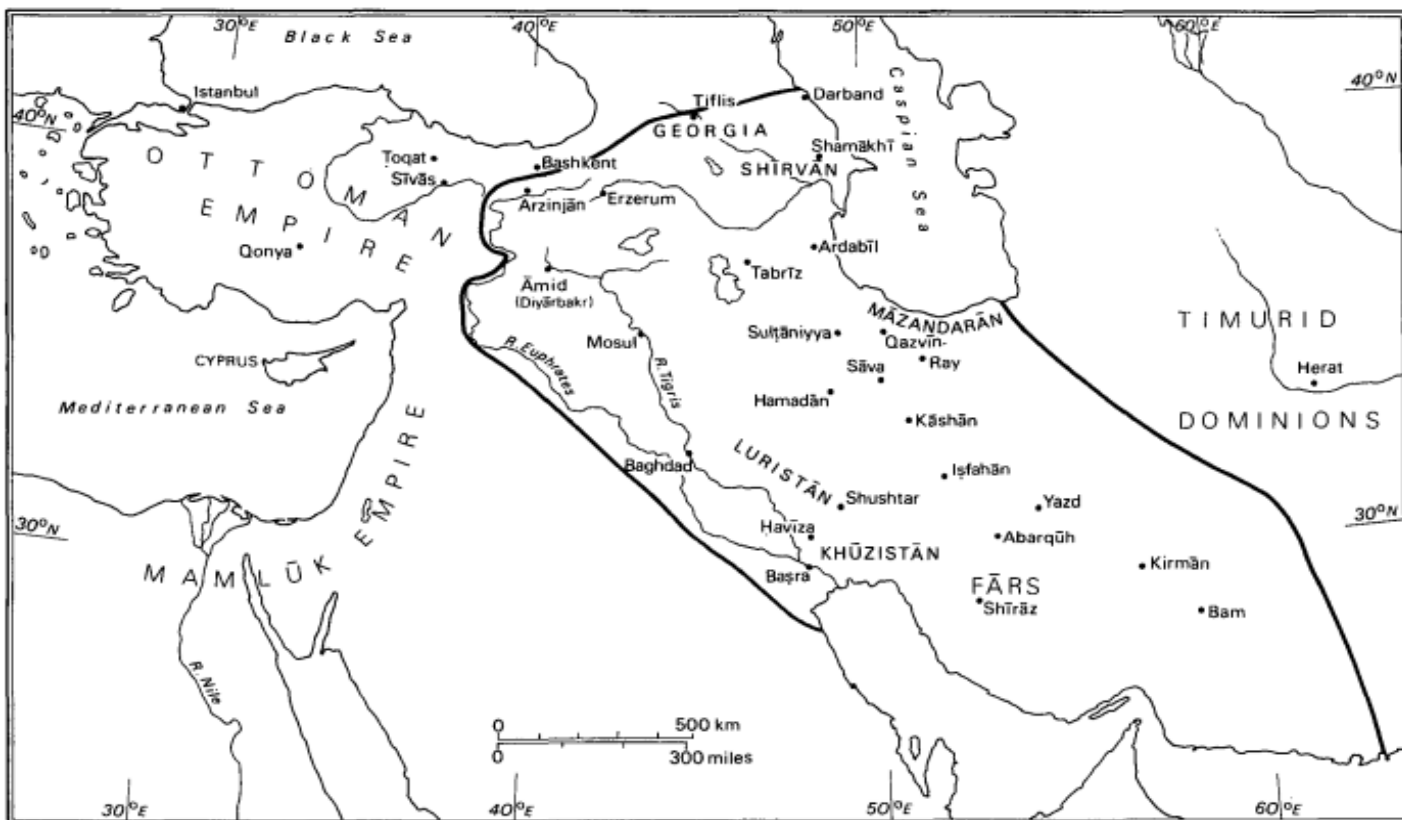
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Contents

Contents.....	1
PREFACE	2
Origins of the Şafawīyya	4
Persia and Sunni Islam	9
Shāh 'Ismā'īl	12
Conquest of Persia	20
Ottoman Confrontation	27
The Later Safavid State	36
Repeating the past?	38
Glossary.....	40
Bibliography	43



Iran at the time of the Safavids



Maximum extent of the Ağ Qoyunlu Confederation under Ūzūn Hasan

PREFACE

Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Caliph, said that the later generations of this Ummah would only prevail by the means of which the first generations prevailed. History repeats itself. Today, in light of current events in the Muslim world a subject that is oft brought up is the “Sunni-Shī’a divide”, a narrative wherein the Shī’a are portrayed as victims of a majority-Sunni onslaught. Often we hear of “a genocide against Shī’a” which aims to completely whitewash not only current events that have produced a genocide of Sunnis in Syria and Iraq today, but also historical animosity and brutality of the Shī’a against the Sunnah.

In my previous study, *‘The Sunni Revival’* we saw how the Shī’a did in fact gain ascendancy throughout the Muslim world at one point, from roughly the mid-9th century to the mid-10th century. The oppression, bloodshed and betrayal that occurred during these years at the hands of the Fatimid, Buyid and Hamdanid Shī’i states was unparalleled up until the Mongol invasions. But yet another area in history is largely under-reported and under-analysed: the creation of the Safavid state in Persia. The Safavids, by the time of the first Safavid Shāh ‘Ismā‘īl I were extremely fanatical Shī’a who had just come into power and declared sovereignty over all Persia, but there was a catch: in opposition to the Safavid Order’s Shī’i faith, Persia was largely Sunni Muslim. The friction here produced a genocide in which the majority Sunni population of Iran were given three choices: Convert to Shī’ism, flee or die. Most either fled, converted while holding their faith in secret or were slaughtered in the tens of thousands at the least, and the Safavids imported many Azeri’s, Turkmen and Lebanese Shī’a to supplement this large-scale disaster I, considering Persia’s history in the Ummah, rate the loss of Persia as greater than the loss of Al-Andalus and only second to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. It is conspicuous that the plan to cleanse Al-Andalus by the Christians was enacted in 1501, the same year Shāh ‘Ismā‘īl I came to power and also began his systematic cleansing of Ahl al-Sunnah from Persia.

This work will look at the Safavid's origins and their expansion from their home city of Ardabil throughout northern Persia and eastern Anatolia. Then we will look at how Persia contributed to Islam to understand the impact of the once majority-Sunni land being forcefully converted to Shī'ism. The study will then move to focus mainly on Shāh 'Ismā'īl's biography and coming to power, the genocide that came with it, and the details of how he enforced Shī'ism on Sunni Persia through a reign of terror and slaughter. The Safavid state's foreign policy with the Ottoman Empire must be understood in order to understand how today's conflicts have roots in the polarisation between the Ottomans and Safavids, the results of which not only curbed Safavid imperial ambitions and forced Shāh 'Ismā'īl into drunkenness, a factor which contributed to his death at the relatively young age of 36, but also how today's Middle East is defined by wars fought in that period. We will not analyse the Safavid state institutions nor its army, but specifically highlight the imperative of the Safavid state: to enforce and propagate Twelver Shī'i doctrine and the genocide that occurred due to this mission.

It is important to note that I will refer to Iran as Persia in regards to all events that occur up to the official changing of the name of the country from Persia to Iran in 1935, after which I will refer to it as Iran. To avoid confusion any Turkish words will not be transliterated into its Arabic form, such as Mehmet-Muhammad.

Origins of the Ṣafawīyya

Shāh 'Ismā'īl I was a descendant of the ethnically-Kurdish Ṣāfi al-Dīn Ardabīlī (1252-1334), a *Shāfi'ī* Sunni and *Ṣūfi Shaykh* who lived in Azerbaijan and was the leader of the *Ṣafawīyya*, a Ṣūfi order from which Shāh 'Ismā'īl would later use as the name of his new state.¹ The order mainly operated on a spiritual dimension, yet did not shy away from organising *Jihād* against the Mongols and later on against the Georgian Christians in the Caucasus.² Ṣāfi al-Dīn's order also provided spiritual comfort to the many Muslims who had faced the oppression of the Mongol hordes. Such feats enabled the order to grow and spread from its home base in Ardabil, extending a network across Azerbaijan and into northern Persia. The missionary work continued over the next hundred years after Ardabīl's death. The order's expansion would continue under his son Sadr al-Dīn Mūsā and grandson Khawaja 'Alī, whose scions would militarise the character of the order.

Yet the order also experienced a profound shift in theology which would change the course of history and begin a set of conflicts that have lasted until the modern day. By the time of Ṣāfi al-Dīn's great-grandsons, the order had strayed far from its original Sunni identity and had become firmly rooted in extreme Shī'ite beliefs. This transition from Sunni Islam to Shī'ism is heavily debated by historians but they agree that Ṣāfi al-Dīn and his son Sadr al-Dīn Mūsā (1305-1391) were Shāfi'ī Sunnis, and the transition must have occurred between the time of Khawaja 'Alī (1368-1429) to Shaykh Junayd (d.1460), Khawaja's grandson. It is more likely that it was Junayd who began this process and the rest of the order followed their Shaykh, who was always a descendant of Ṣāfi al-Dīn, into Shī'ism. Junayd would become head of the Safavid order in 1447. It is he who laid the foundations for the Safavid's military and political aspirations as he transformed this spiritual order into a military one and marshaled the Safavid Order into a group of 5,000 fanatical warriors. These were later called the *Qezelbāsh*, Turkish for "redhead" as they wore distinct red hats with 12 indents (*tāj-e ḥaydari*) to signify their following of the Twelve Imams.

¹ Rudi Matthee, "The Safavid Dynasty", 2008

² Kaveh Farrokh, "Iran at War: 1500-1988"

They were made up of Shī'i Turkmen tribes who were fanatically loyal to the Safavid leader, and were willing to sacrifice themselves for him. This is telling in their battle-cry:

'Qurbān öldighim pirüm murshidim!'

("My spiritual leader and master, for whom I sacrifice myself!")³

Junayd titled himself *Sultān* as no previous Shaykh of the order had done, which showed the shift of ambitions from spiritual to temporal authority. The Safavid ideology now could be considered by the term *Ghulāt*⁴, adopting heretical views such as Junayd being a divine reincarnation of God and that his son Haydar was "the son of Allah".⁵ This tradition continued down to Shāh 'Ismā'īl whose followers also called him "Allah", a belief which 'Ismā'īl's son Shāh Tahmāsb tried to dampen but to little avail.⁶ It was in fact during Tahmāsb's era that "orthodox" Twelver Shī'a, imported from Lebanon and Bahrain started to steer the Safavids away from these Ghulāt beliefs of the divinity of their leader and his reincarnation. However they would not be entirely successful⁷, and more often than not some of these Ghulāt beliefs were incorporated into orthodox Twelver doctrine.

There are many reasons given for this change from Sunni Islam to Shī'ism, and the main one that is cited by historians is the influence of the Turkmen tribes that served as the rank-and-file soldiery of the Safavids. Being nomadic steppe warriors, they carried a lot of animalist and shamanistic beliefs that they mixed with Islam, leading to this *ghuluww* form of Twelver Shī'ism. It is also reported that they engaged in wild drinking bouts and even cannibalism, though this is debated. Another reason given is that the Safavids wanted to form their own identity which separated them from the majority-Sunni population, however, this is less credible as such a reason ignores personal feelings of the Safavid leaders and their followers, and that claiming heterodox beliefs in the midst of an Orthodox population did not prove wise realpolitik.

³ Cambridge History of Iran, p. 214, volume 6, 1986

⁴ Marshall Hodgson, "Venure of Islam", 1974

⁵ Rudi Matthee, "The Safavid Dynasty", 2008

⁶ Oxford History of Islam, p. 205-206, volume 3, 2010

⁷ Ibid.

Thus I believe it was a genuine, gradual change in faith and growing ambition. We must remember the environment that these men grew up in: surrounded by fiercely fanatical Turkmen who carried a lot of their pagan beliefs from the steppe and surrounded their Shaykh in adoration and loyalty. Thus such an identity was sure to develop. Junayd's shift in theology was challenged by his brother Ja'far, and forced Junayd to leave Ardabil with his soldiers.⁸ They headed first to Trebizond, which was still ruled by the remnants of the Byzantine Empire after the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Sultān Mehmet II in 1453, but retreated when the Ottoman armies approached Trebizond as well.

The Safavids then journeyed to eastern Anatolia where Junayd came into the service of the Amir of Diyarbakır, Ūzūn Hassan of the Ağ Qoyunlu dynasty. Ağ Qoyunlu is Turkish for "White Sheep". They were Turkmen who had flooded into the Iranian Plateau after Timur had replicated the Mongol invasions and granted the nomads Diyarbakır in eastern Anatolia in 1402. Ağ Qoyunlu were confined in that region until the reign of Ūzūn Hassan, who used the Safavid Qezelbāsh to defeat their rival tribe in Azerbaijan, the Qara Qoyunlu, Turkish for "Black Sheep", in 1467. By his death, Ūzūn had expanded the tribal confederation down the Tigris, annexing Baghdad and moving deep into Iran, as far as Khorasan. Ūzūn married Junayd's sister Khadija Begum to cement the new alliance. However, it would not be Junayd who would realise the Safavid ambition of rulership, as he was killed in battle in 1460 near Shirvan, in modern-day Azerbaijan. The precise circumstances are unclear but it is generally accepted that with the instigation of his brother Ja'far, as well as Safavid aspirations to use Shirvan as a launch pad for an invasion of Persia, Khalil Sultān, Shirvanshāh of Shirvan pre-empted Junayd who was killed in the ensuing conflict.

The Safavid order would endure as Junayd's son Haydar, known as "the son of Allah" by the Qezelbāsh became the Safavid leader. It was Haydar who instituted the tradition of the "tāj-e ḥaydari" headwear of the Qezelbāsh, due to a dream he had where 'Alī ibn Abi Talib, who was revered and considered semi-divine amongst many Shī'ites, appeared to him and told him to wear the twelve-gored hat.

⁸ Kaveh Farrokh, "Iran at War: 1500-1988"

Haydar continued his father's work and aided Ūzūn Hassan in defeating Jahan Shāh of the Qara Qoyunlu dynasty in 1467 at the Battle of Chapakchur. The "Black Sheep" were Shī'ites of the less extreme character based in Azerbaijan.⁹ Ūzūn Hassan rewarded Haydar with rulership of Ardabil, the ancestral homeland of the Safavid Order. This was the first step to temporal authority, and this land grant provided a base where Qezelbāsh flocked to from Anatolia. In 1471, Haydar married Ūzūn Hassan's sister Halīma Begum which further cemented the alliance between Ūzūn and Haydar. This marriage would produce three children: 'Alī (d.1494), Ibrāhīm Mīrzā and 'Ismā'īl (1487-1524), future founder of the Safavid state. Yet the Safavid ambitions were bound to cause friction with the Aġ Qoyunlu, and indeed the alliance between cooled after Ūzūn died in 1478 and his son Ya'qūb succeeded him to the throne. Ya'qūb viewed the well-armed and fanatical Safavid Qezelbāsh as a threat to the Aġ Qoyunlu domains.¹⁰ Yet Ya'qūb could not prevent disintegration due to the Turkish-style succession that followed a ruler's death, whereby every son would get a piece. The confederation fell into a succession dispute and broke up into warring statelets.

It is important to note that at this point the Safavids were still not a state but still an order which had enlarged considerably since the time of Shaykh Junayd. Haydar merely ruled Ardabil on behalf of the Aġ Qoyunlu dynasty. Sensing hostility from Ya'qūb and knowing that the Safavids could not contend with the Aġ Qoyunlu, Haydar led his men in various raids across Daghestan and Circassia, the first of which was in 1483 and the second in 1487. Reviving the ancestral homeland of the Şafawīyya created a central base for the Safavid supporters to flock to, and these *Razzias* (*Ġāzī* raids) also gained the Safavids many adherents across eastern Anatolia, the Caucasus, and northern Persia.

⁹ H.R Roemer, Cambridge History of Iran, Volume 6, 1986

¹⁰ Ibid.

Haydar would embark on his third and final raid in 1488, where he made the mistake of sacking the Shirvan capital Shamakhi and burning it to the ground. The Shirvanshāh Farukh Yassar, who had allowed Haydar to cross his territory in both of the previous Safavid expeditions across the Caucasus now called on the Ağ Qoyunlu leader Ya'qub for aid against Haydar.¹¹

Ya'qub readily dispatched 4,000 men to aid Farukh Yassar to eliminate this threat. The Safavids met with this combined force at Tarbarsaran, near Derbent. According to differing accounts, Haydar was killed by an arrow or injured by it and then beheaded, not far from where his father Junayd had also been killed by the previous Shirvanshāh. Haydar's three sons would survive him, and so would the Safavid order.

¹¹Ibid.

Persia and Sunni Islam

Ibn Khaldūn, the famous Arab historian said:

‘It is a remarkable fact that, with few exceptions. Most Muslim scholars... in the intellectual sciences have been non-Arabs, thus the founders of grammar were al-Sībawayh and after him, al-Farsi and Al-Zajjāj. All of them were of Persian descent and they invented rules of Arab grammar. Great jurists were Persians. Only the Persians engaged in the task of preserving knowledge and writing systematic scholarly works. Thus the truth of the statement of the Prophet Muhammad becomes apparent. “If learning were suspended in the highest parts of heaven the Persians would attain it.” The intellectual sciences were also the preserve of the Persians, left alone by the Arabs who did not cultivate them... as was the case with all crafts. This situation continued in the cities as long as the Persian and Persian countries: Iraq, Khorasan, Transoxiana retained their sedentary culture.’¹²

The Islamic religion was upheld in the scholarship of giants such as Imam Abū Ḥanīfah, Imam al-Tirmidhī, Imam al-Bukhārī, Imam al-Ghazālī, Imam Ahmad and others, all of whom were Persian in origin or upbringing. Persia was central to the Ummah and even the early Ottoman state sent budding ‘*Ulamā*’ to the *Madāris* in Persia as there were not enough Sunni schools in Anatolia.¹³ The role of Persian ‘*Ulamā*’ was also central to the revival of Islam in the Seljuk period as has been discussed in the study ‘*Revival of the Sunnah*’. The Arabs of Aleppo who had lived under Shī‘i influence for so long had treated the Persian Sunni scholars that the Seljuk Kings Ālp Arslan and Malikshāh I had imported with distrust and hostility due to the difference in faith. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Ayyūbi also imported many Sunni scholars from Persia to teach at the various *Madāris* he built from Cairo to Mosul.¹⁴

¹²Ibn Khaldun, ‘Al-Muqadimmah’

¹³ ‘Oxford History of Islam’, volume 3, p. 205-207, 2010

¹⁴ ‘Ali al-Sallabi, ‘The Ayyubid State’, volume 2, p.75-87

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah said:

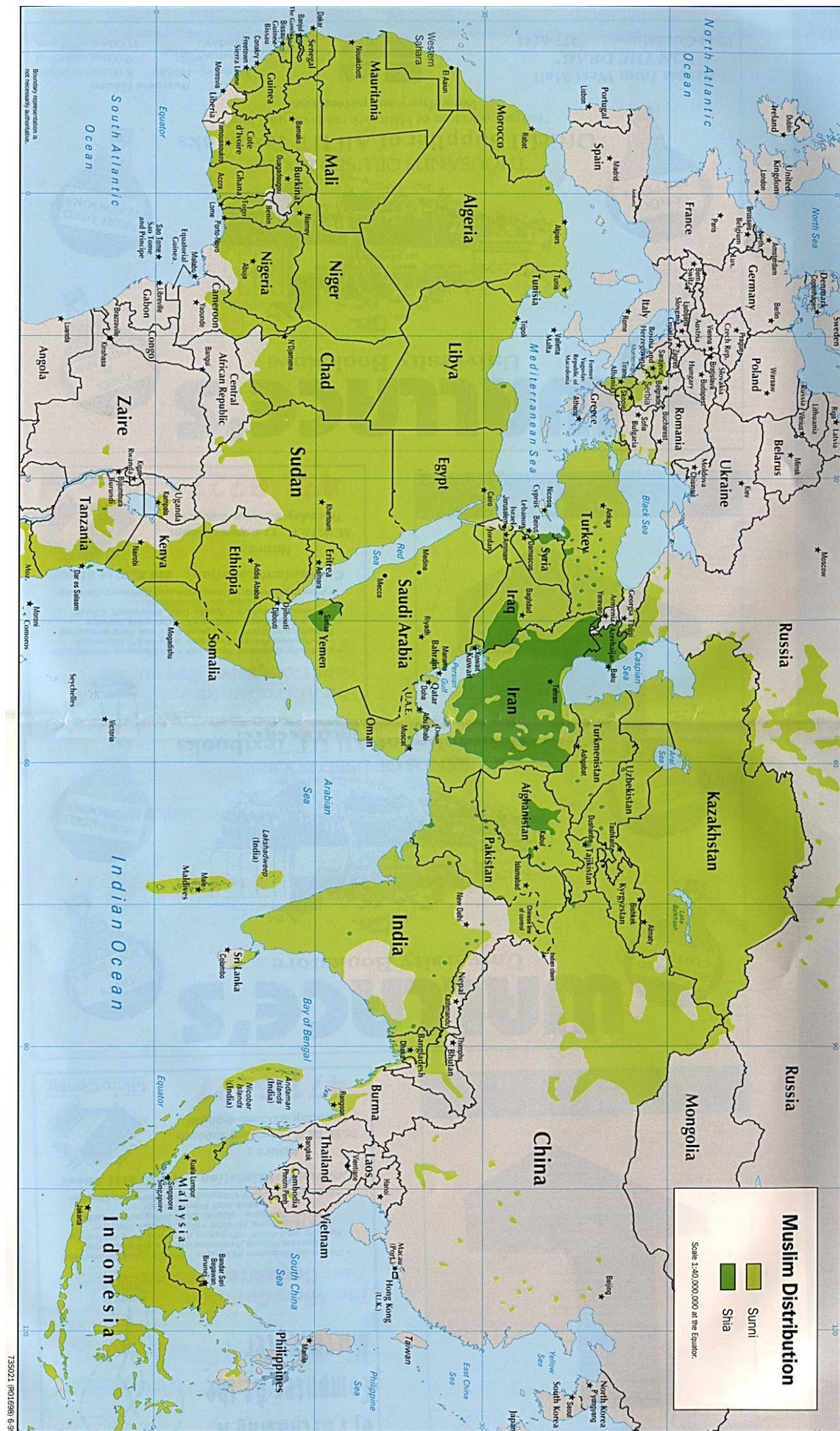
‘The truthfulness of this is what was noticed from the Tabi’īn and those who came after them, from the people of Persia, the freemen and the freed slaves alike, such as Al-Hasan, Ibn Sīrīn and ‘Ikrimah, the freed slave of Ibn ‘Abbās, and others who came after them who were eminent in faith, religion and Islamic knowledge, to the point that these prominent people became better than most Arabs. The same applies to other non-Arab ethnicities such as the Abyssinians, the Romans and the Turks, who were outstanding in faith and religion, and they were many as is known by the scholars. Indeed, the real virtue is following what Allah sent Muhammad ﷺ to deliver, of faith and knowledge, both inwardly and outwardly; the stronger a person is (in faith and knowledge), the better he is.’

This was the *tafseer* of a *hadeeth* that is authentically narrated from the Prophet of Allah ﷺ:

‘If knowledge (or faith) were hanging at the Pleiades, some men from Persia would reach it.’¹⁵

From this knowledge alone it is understood how important Persia has been as a fertile ground for the religion of Islam to be preserved and be taught. But the implications of the Sunnah being wiped out in Persia go beyond theology. In geopolitical terms, while Al-Andalus was a far-flung province of *Dār al-Islām*, Persia is at the heart, representing the most solid land connection between Muslim east and Muslim west. The Safavid takeover essentially planted a generally hostile Shī’i state in between the Muslim world, severing the link and forcing Muslims to circumvent Persia or pass through it, which could only be done with either secrecy or by appeasing the Shī’i officials of Persia sufficiently to get through. Indeed, Evliya Çelebi, an Ottoman traveler who lived in the 17th century reported with dismay at the ritual cursing of the three Caliphs he witnessed as he traveled through Persia, and he lamented the downfall of Ahl al-Sunnah in that land.

¹⁵ Sahih Muslim, 6177



The mark of the Safavids is felt today as Shi'a Iran straddles the belt between two halves of the Muslim world

Shāh 'Ismā'īl

After the death of Haydar in 1488, his eldest son 'Alī succeeded him as head of the Safavid Order. Yet 'Alī would not experience the success of his father Haydar in ruling Ardabil. In 1491, he along with his two brothers Ibrāhīm and 'Ismā'īl were taken from Ardabil and imprisoned with their mother Halīma Begum at the Istakhr fortress in the southern province of Fars.¹⁶ After two years of incarceration, they were released by Rustam, one of the Ağ Qoyunlu leaders who was wrestling with his cousins Baysunqur and Ahmed Bey to control the confederation. The succession crisis had continued after Ūzūn's death between his sons Ya'qūb (father of Baysunqur) and Maqsūd (father of Rustam) and Uğurlu Muhammad (father of Ahmed Bey), who in turn would pass on the crisis to their respective sons.

Rustam capitalised on the strength of the Safavid order by releasing the brothers, but within a year decided to re-incarcerate them as he saw the Safavid strength as a threat. In 1494, 'Alī decided to flee to Ardabil with his brothers and mothers to avoid certain death, but Rustam dispatched troops to intercept them, who eventually overtake the Safavids, killing 'Alī and 700 of his followers. However, before his death, 'Alī had designated 'Ismā'īl as his successor at the tender age of 7. The two remaining brothers and their mother escaped to Ardabil but being head of the order, 'Ismā'īl was ferried on eastwards to the city of Lahijan in Gilan province, on the Caspian coast. There he was hosted by its ruler Kārkīya Mīrzā 'Alī. Ibrāhīm remained in Ardabil, opting to become a *dervish*. A reason some give for this behaviour is his love for his mother Halīma Begum and wanting to be near her. His fate is unclear as at this point reports on him completely fade from Safavid accounts and it is assumed he died as a dervish in Ardabil.

¹⁶ Kaveh Farrokh, 'Iran at War: 1500-1988'

By 1497 Rustam, without the support of the Safavid soldiers that had earlier bolstered his rule, had been defeated by his cousin Ahmed Bey. Ahmed Bey had received Ottoman support due to his father Uğurlu marrying an Ottoman princess, the daughter of Mehmet II.¹⁷ This was merely the beginning of Ottoman interference in eastern Anatolian and Persian politics and would continue, resulting in greater wars with the later Safavid State.

Meanwhile, Shāh 'Ismā'īl was being tutored in Lahijan by Shī'i Ṣūfīs and coalescing support for his ambitions.¹⁸ Kārkīya appointed one of his own Shī'i scholars to tutor 'Ismā'īl, a man named Shams al-Dīn al-Lahījī. His influence on the young Safavid Shaykh would be apparent as he would later be appointed as *Ṣadr*, the highest religious authority in the Safavid Empire by 'Ismā'īl. The Safavid supporters had not been reduced in their zeal or number but rather had been patient and waited for their leader. During 'Ismā'īl's five years at Lahijan, the Safavid *da'wah* had continued unceasingly through a tight-knit network of Qezelbāsh called *Ahl-e Iqtisās*. They propagated the Safavid *da'wah* to the Turkmen tribes in Azerbaijan, eastern Anatolia and the Caspian coast. The core method of this *da'wah* was the Ṣūfī relationship between *Murshid* (spiritual leader) and *Murīd* (student). The Murīd would pledge absolute allegiance to his Murshid and follow him in whatever he commanded. A lot of the *da'wah* had ghuluww beliefs (see above) which the shamanistic Turkmen openly embraced.

Another form of *da'wah* was poetry by 'Ismā'īl which tended to include these paganist beliefs as well as pre-Islamic Iranian culture. A few examples of 'Ismā'īl's poetry is enough to discern his mindset and beliefs:

¹⁷ Vladimir Minorsky. 'The Aq-Qoyunlu and Land Reforms', 1955

¹⁸ 'Oxford History of Islam', volume 3, p. 205-207, 2010

‘My name is Shāh ‘Ismā‘īl. I am God's mystery. I am the leader of all these Ġāzīs.
My mother is Fāṭima, my father is ‘Alī; I am the Pīr of the Twelve Imams.
I have revenged my father's blood from Yazīd. Know well that I am of Haydarian
essence.

I am the living Khidr and Jesus, son of Mary. I am the Alexander of the age.
Behold, Yazīd and the polytheists and the damned. Quit am I of the Qibla of the
hypocrites.

In me is Prophethood and the secret of Wilāyat. Successor am I of Muhammad
Mustafa.

With my sword I subdued the world. I am the Qanbar (slave) of ‘Alī Murtaḍá.

My sire is Ṣafī, my father Haydar. Truly I am the Ja‘far of the audacious.

I am a Husaynī and my curse upon Yazīd! I am Khatā‘i, a servant of the Shāh.¹⁹

‘Today I have come to the world as a Master. Know truly that I am Haydar’s son.
I am Fereydun, Khosrow, Jamshid, and Zahak. I am Zal's son (Rostam) and
Alexander.

The mystery of I am the truth is hidden in this my heart.

I am the Absolute Truth and what I say is Truth.

I belong to the religion of the "Adherent of the ‘Alī" and on the Shāh's path I am a
guide to everyone who says: "I am a Muslim." My sign is the "Crown of Happiness".

I am the signet-ring on Sulaymān's finger. Muhammad is made of light, ‘Alī of
Mystery.

I am a pearl in the sea of Absolute Reality.

I am Khatā‘i, the Shāh's slave full of shortcomings.

At thy gate I am the smallest and the last servant.²⁰

¹⁹ Vladimir Minorsky, "The Poetry of Shāh ‘Ismā‘īl I"

²⁰ *ibid.*

His poems show that he regarded himself as some semi-divine figure, and his followers certainly became attached to this notion, with the Safavid Order being filled with fanatics. 'Ismā'īl deemed that at this point the support he had garnered was enough to move to the next stage of his ambitions: fulfillment. In 1499, after five years of exile and patience in Lahijan, the now-twelve-years-old Safavid Shaykh set out from the land of Gilan and headed for Ardabil, the ancestral home of the order. The Ağ Qoyunlu confederation had again fallen into civil war and the Safavids hoped to capitalise on this. On his way, 1500 men from Turkmen tribes flocked to his banner to join his march. The Ağ Qoyunlu ruler of Ardabil allied with Farukh Yassar of Shirvan to try and defeat this threat, so 'Ismā'īl was forced east to the Talysh lands along the southwest Caspian coast. After wintering there in 1499-1500, he then set out for Erzincan in eastern Anatolia, where another 1,000 Turkish adherents to the order joined him. At Erzincan, 'Ismā'īl found 7,000 Turkish warriors had assembled from the various Qezelbāsh tribes: Ostājlu, Rūmlū, Takkālu, Dhu'l-Qadr, Afshār, Qajār, and Varsaq.²¹ It might have been this impression - that of so many loyal soldiers fanatical and ready to die for him - that spurred the child-prince, 'Ismā'īl, to look past Ardabil; past all this, he saw the possible conquest of Persia.

But before 'Ismā'īl could fulfill his ambitions, he would have to deal with his two immediate adversaries: Alvand Mīrzā of the Ağ Qoyunlu and Farukh Yassar of Shirvan. 'Ismā'īl decided to deal with the latter first, as his father and grandfather Haydar and Junayd were both killed at the hands of the Shirvanshāhs. 'Ismā'īl's force set out for Derbent, whose civilian population had evacuated as they saw the Safavid forces arriving. However, the local citadel resisted. After twenty days of siege and failing thrice to breach the walls, the Safavid forces succeeded in sapping operations under one of the towers, filling the hole with wood and setting it alight. Seeing this, the commander of the citadel promptly surrendered.²² 'Ismā'īl's forces, now bolstered with supplies and equipment from Derbent, marched south to meet Farukh Yassar's forces at Shamakhi, west of Baku.

²¹ Kaveh Farrokhi, "Iran at War: 1500-1988"

²² Ibid.

In October 1500, at the Battle of Jabani, the two armies clashed. 'Ismā'īl's army of some 7,000 soundly defeated the Shirvanshāh's forces numbering 27,000 and Farukh Yassar was killed, reportedly being captured and beheaded. Thus 'Ismā'īl avenged his father and grandfather. Farrukh Yassar would be remembered as a pious man. He had patronised mosques such as Tuba Shāhi and Jumu'a mosques in Derbent, and he was a merciful ruler, especially in comparison to what came later.

This great victory further convinced the Qezelbāsh of 'Ismā'īl's infallibility and invincibility, and they promptly marched to Baku. They sieged the city and it soon surrendered, where began the first stages of the genocide against the Sunnis of Persia. 'Ismā'īl exhumed the corpses of the Shirvanshāhs from their mausoleum and had them burnt. He then forcibly converted the population of Baku to Shī'ism and enforced this through forcing people to ritually curse the first three Caliphs, as per Shī'i tradition, as well as adding the innovation "*And 'Alī is the Wāli of Allah*" to the *adhān*. Those who resisted were killed by the Qezelbāsh who patrolled the streets and instilled a reign of terror.²³ Now 'Ismā'īl had eliminated the first of his enemies, sights were set on the Ağ Qoyunlu. The civil war had ended in 1500 just as 'Ismā'īl was in Erzincan forming his army. Alvand would rule from eastern Anatolia to Azerbaijan while Murād Mīrzā would rule Fars and Kerman, as well as Iraq e-Ajam.²⁴ Alvand marched to the Caucasus at the head of an army of around 40,000 cavalry and infantry to confront 'Ismā'īl but was met with a vanguard led by one of 'Ismā'īl's commanders, Ghoraberi-Qajar who commanded just 5,000 cavalry. In the ensuing battle, Ghoraberi-Qajar was killed but it is recorded that Alvand lost 5,000 cavalry, a crippling amount of casualties considering the obvious superiority in numbers that he possessed. Alvand marched on, intent on meeting 'Ismā'īl in battle, which in turn provoked 'Ismā'īl to come out and meet him.

²³ 'Encyclopedia Iranica: Esmā'īl Ṣafawī', Vol. 8, p. 628-636, 2008

²⁴ Kaveh Farrokhi, "Iran at War: 1500-1988"

'Ismā'īl arrived at Sharur, near Nakhchivan, and his 7,000 troops were commanded by a Qezelbāsh officer named Halvachioghlu. In July of 1501, the Safavids met in battle with Alvand's forces, reportedly more than four times the size of the Safavids.²⁵ Yet as with the Shirvanshāh, numbers could not stand against the fanaticism of the Safavids who fought day and night until the enemy were sufficiently demoralised that they began to rout, along with Alvand. They raided the camps of the Ağ Qoyunlu army and gained large amounts of war booty. As the Safavids were enriched, the land stood in stark desolation as these wars had ravaged them. Trade was disrupted and bouts of plague flowed. The Qezelbāsh were free to sow terror and dominate the Sunni population, now faced with the prospect of Shī'i domination.²⁶

This was it. Both of 'Ismā'īl's premier enemies had been defeated. Azerbaijan was under full control of the Safavids. 'Ismā'īl entered Tabriz in the same month at the head of his victorious army, which seemed invincible to onlookers. He ascended the throne of Tabriz and crowned himself Shāh 'Ismā'īl I, ruler of Azerbaijan. The Safavid Empire he established would last until 1736, and the longer impact would be the permanent conversion of Persia from Sunni Islam to Shī'ism. He accomplished all this when he was only 15 years of age. In order to cement the founding of his new empire, 'Ismā'īl I had coins minted in his name, Twelver Shī'ism was proclaimed the state religion and the ritual cursing of the first three Caliphs as well as the innovation of the adhān were the principle acts of enforcing this identity.²⁷ Of note is 'Ismā'īl I's choice of using Shāh instead of another title such as *Sultān* or *Khān*. It is quite clearly documented that 'Ismā'īl I believed in the pre-Islamic Persian tradition of sanctified, divine Kingship which was called *Farr*. 'Ismā'īl I not only fabricated genealogy to *Ahl al-Bayt* but claimed lineage to the last Sassanid Emperor, Yazdegird III.

²⁵ 'Encyclopedia Iranica: Esmā'īl Ṣafawī', volume 8, p. 628-636, 2008

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

After 'Ismā'īl I had become Shāh, he had a genealogy fabricated by the Shī'i scholars, according to which Ṣāfi al-Dīn descended from the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kādhim (d. 800).²⁸ What is clear and agreed upon is that not only were the Safavids not of Persian stock like its people, but were also not of *Qurayshi* Arab lineage. They were Kurdish and this was telling in the descriptions of 'Ismā'īl with his ruddy skin and reddish hair.²⁹ The wife of Haydar and mother of 'Ismā'īl I, Halīma Begum was the daughter of the Pontic Greek princess Despīna Khātūn, who in turn was the daughter of the Emperor John IV of Trebizond, the last remaining pocket of Byzantine existence against the Ottoman Empire. Thus 'Ismā'īl I's heritage was a myriad: Greek, Turkish, Azeri, and Kurdish but there is little evidence to suggest either Persian or Arab stock. Nonetheless, he grew up being bilingual Azeri and Persian due to the land he was in. The Safavids were preceded in this fabrication of genealogy by the Fatimid dynasty, whose rulers also claimed lineage to Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī as a way of legitimizing their claim to the Caliphate. In both instances, both had religious scholars draw up genealogies and hide their origins. The Safavids prepared to invade Persia with not a Persian army, but a nomadic Turkmen army who were foreigners with foreign beliefs.

The common belief is that the Safavids due to their appropriation of Persian culture and identity were Persian themselves and that state enforcement of Shī'i identity was also a Persian endeavour. However, evidence suggests this was a foreign objective enforced on the staunchly Sunni population of Persia. This resistance was shown in the rejection of Shāh 'Ismā'īl's commands by the Sunni '*Ulamā*' and the deaths of tens of thousands of Sunnis by the sword in preference to converting.

Tabriz was a city that had a population of 200-300,000 and is estimated to have been two-thirds Sunni and was immediately subject to a reign of terror whereby *Tabarā'īyān*, Qezelbāsh soldiers who patrolled the streets ensured that all Shī'i rituals were enforced. No Sunni escaped the ritual cursing of the three Caliphs. They made sure everyone who attended prayer in the mosques prayed in the Shī'i way.

²⁸ H.R Roemer, Cambridge History of Iran, volume 6, p. 199, 1986

²⁹ Oxford history of Islam, volume 3, p. 206-207, 2010

The Tabarā'īyān would assault random Muslims and force them to curse the Caliphs. If anyone refused to do any of these things they would be killed. 'Ismā'īl I reserved special rancour for the Sunni 'Ulamā' who were punitively chosen for "punishment" so that the Muslim population would become afraid and also lose their link to religious knowledge. This was done through exile or execution. It was Tabriz where 'Ismā'īl I first invited the initial waves of Twelver Shī'ites from Iraq and Lebanon to come and help him enforce Shī'ism as a state religion.³⁰ This was required as sources state that there was only one book on the Shī'i religion in the whole of Tabriz, a book written by a Shī'i scholar of the Mongol period, Jamāl al-Dīn ibn Mûtahhar al-Hilli called "*Qawā'id al-Ahkām fi Ma'rifāt al-Halāl wa'l-Harām*".³¹ It was written in Arabic, rendering further disuse until it was translated into Persian.

This also explains the heretical beliefs the Safavids claimed, such as 'Ismā'īl I being God or close to God, and other extreme beliefs regarding the Twelve Imams and giving them attributes that in Islam were reserved for either God or the Prophet. These beliefs would be toned down by the imported Shī'i scholars whose milder form of Twelver Shī'ism largely got rid of the heretical concepts of godhood and prophethood for the Safavid Shāh, but retained the issue of attributes of the Imams and so on, as is evidenced by their books such as *al-Kāfi* and *Tahdhīb al-Ahkām* which are the main sources today for Twelver Shī'a. Thus it was that foreigners came to enforce the new religion by the sword and by forcing the Shī'i teachings down their throats. It was, by all accounts, a period of genocide against the Sunnah of Persia.

³⁰ Oxford History of Islam, Volume 3, p. 208-210, 2010

³¹ H.R Roemer, Cambridge History of Iran, volume 6, p. 194, 1986

Conquest of Persia

As 'Ismā'īl I set up his new state in Tabriz, the remnants of the Aġ Qoyunlu army gathered under Alvand's brother Murad Mīrzā and met with the Safavids in three separate battles in 1503: at the battle of Hamadan, the battle of Fars and the battle of Shiraz. 'Ismā'īl I also destroyed this army in all three battles and essentially ended the Aġ Qoyunlu dynasty.³² Persia now lay open to him. He marched through Persia, conquering the rest of Fars first, the governorship of which was given to the leader of the Dhu'l-Qadr Qezelbāsh tribe. In 1504 he conquered Iraq al-Ajam, marching into the cities of Yazd and Isfahan, then turned back westwards and campaigned from 1505-1507 to conquer eastern Anatolia and Kurdistan. The governorship of Diyarbakır was awarded to the leader of the Ostājlu. The Safavids now had a border with the Ottoman Empire but 'Ismā'īl I refrained from provoking them. Instead, he turned south, and in 1508 the Safavids finally eliminated any element of the Aġ Qoyunlu remaining by conquering Baghdad, as well as the Shī'i holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. In Baghdad, he desecrated the tombs of the great Sunni scholars Imam Abū Ḥanīfah and Abdul-Qādir al-Jīlāni, as well as the Abbasid Caliphs. He enforced the ritual cursing of the first three Caliphs and all the other forms mentioned in Baku and Tabriz and other cities.

Khuzestan, an Arab province in south-western Iran volunteered to be under Safavid suzerainty after losing in battle, and then Shirvan in Azerbaijan was also fully conquered. These people were reportedly led by Shī'i Ghulāt called the *Musha'sha*. They believed that 'Alī ibn abi Talib was God and that their leader Sayyid Fayyāz was the reincarnation of God. A Safavid chronicler reported these and reported how they would chant “*‘Alī ṭāhī*” (‘Alī is God) in their circles while thrusting swords and other weapons into their bodies which would not wound them, thus proving their invulnerability due to the chants.³³ Sayyid Fayyāz would be killed in the battle against the Safavids which forced his brother Sayyid Falāh to accept Safavid suzerainty.³⁴

³² Kaveh Farrokh, “Iran at War: 1500-1988”

³³ H.R Roemer, Cambridge History of Iran, volume 6, p. 216, 1986

³⁴ Ibid.

Throughout these conquests, the Sunni population was persecuted; driven out and killed, forced to curse the three Caliphs and the Prophet's wife 'Ā'isha and Shī'ism was enforced at every level.³⁵ Throngs of Turkmen Qezelbāsh came from all over Persia and Anatolia to serve 'Ismā'īl I which only added drive to the Safavid conquests. 'Ismā'īl I then turned his eyes to Khorasan which was ruled by Sunni Uzbek tribes.

In 1507 the Uzbek leader Muhammad Khān Sheybāni had overrun the area, and he sent letters to 'Ismā'īl I after, insulting and threatening the Shāh. By 1510, 'Ismā'īl I's campaigns in the west had finished. He had successfully conquered Azerbaijan, Iraq, eastern Anatolia and Persia. Now he moved east, rapidly conquering the cities of Tus and Mashhad which today lies in north-eastern Iran, near the Turkmenistani border. Sheybāni had retreated both times to fortified positions, and now was in Marw with his army. 'Ismā'īl I did not have the siege equipment required to try and take the city, so he lured Sheybāni out by way of disinformation; he wrote insulting letters to him, as well as declaring he was retreating to Anatolia to crush revolts. He also moved his army in a pattern that indicated such a retreat. Sheybāni took the bait and marched out to the former camp of the Safavid army where a Safavid strike-force led by a captain called Amīr Beg Muslu was waiting. A cavalry of 300 initiated raids against Sheybāni's army who were goaded into a chase. The Safavid strike-force lured the Uzbek army right into a trap: 'Ismā'īl I had organised his army into a horse-shape wherein Sheybāni's men would be lured, trapped and slaughtered. It worked and the Uzbek army was defeated. Sheybāni was killed as he was trying to retreat, and 'Ismā'īl I reportedly had his skull fashioned into a drinking goblet for wine. He then entered Marv and Herat as a conqueror, parcelling out governorship of these new territories to the loyal *Qezelbāsh* tribe masters.³⁶

Persia was now securely under Safavid control. In many places which were Shī'i-populated or believed in syncretistic forms of Islam mixed with local religions, 'Ismā'īl I was welcomed and celebrated. However, the Sunnis as aforementioned were persecuted in much the same manner, and had to practice their religion in secret.

³⁵ 'Encyclopedia Iranica: Esmā'īl Ṣafawī', Vol. 8, p. 628-636, 2008

³⁶ Rudi Matthee, "The Safavid Dynasty", 2008

We will analyse accounts of the Shī'i persecution of the Sunni population in more detail below...

Roger Savory says in his book *"Iran under the Safavids"*:

'Shī'a therefore regard the first three Caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman) as usurpers, and the ritual of cursing of these persons has always been a proper duty of Shī'a, although the emphasis on it varied from time to time. In the early days of the Safavid state, when revolutionary fervour was still strong, great emphasis was placed on this ritual of cursing. Safavid supporters known as Tabarā'īyān walked through the streets and bazaars cursing not only the three "rightly guided" Caliphs mentioned above, but also the enemies of 'Alī and the other Imams, and Sunnis in general. Anyone who failed to respond without delay, "May it [the cursing] be more and not less", was liable to be put to death on the spot. Despite the two centuries of propaganda carried out by Safavids, the promulgation of Shī'ism as the state religion was fraught with danger, and some of 'Ismā'īl's advisers were worried about the reaction to his announcement. "Of the 200,000-300,000 people in Tabriz", they said "Two-thirds are Sunni... We fear that the people may say they do not want Shī'i sovereign, and if (Which God forbid!) the people reject Shī'ism, what can we do about it?" 'Ismā'īl's reply was uncompromising: he had been commissioned to perform this task, he said, and God and the immaculate Imams were his companions, he feared no one. "With God's help," he said, "If the people utter on word of protest, I will draw the sword and leave not one of them."'³⁷

Colin Turner says in his book *"The rise of religious externalism in Safavid Iran"*:

'The suppression of Sunnism was not something that could be taken lightly, given the fact that the vast majority of the populace was Sunni. The ritual vilification of the first three 'rightly guided' Caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman, was rigidly enforced, with bands of zealous Twelver faithful formed in each town to ensure that people adhered to the new anti-Sunni instruction...

³⁷ Roger Savoy, "Iran under the Safavids", p. 27-29, 1980

Although all Twelver Shiite teaching is, by its very nature, implicitly anti-Sunni, the kind of explicit attacks made upon the leading figure of Sunnism by the externalist Twelver *Fuqahā'* in Iran at the beginning of the Safavid period was unprecedented. According to a treatise written by al-Karaki, the cursing of the Caliphs, known as *la'an*, became a religious duty (*wājib*), and in another tract the Sunnis were declared impure (*najas*), a ruling which in effect reduced them in the eyes of the Twelver Shī'ites to the level of dogs, swine, infidels and other such Islamically-defined objects of impurity.'³⁸

Many of the Twelver Shī'i scholars imported by 'Ismā'īl I were mainly from Lebanon. Al-Karaki, his full name being Nūr al-Dīn bin Abd al-Āli (1464-1533), was one the more renowned Twelver Shī'i scholars imported from Ba'albek to build the new Safavid states theological ideology. He was amongst the most active missionaries who travelled throughout Persia to fight Sunni thought.³⁹ In an account by another Shī'i scholar, Nūrullah Shushtāri, it is recounted how al-Karaki accompanied 'Ismā'īl I in the conquest of the city of Kashan and there encountered a Sunni *Qāḍī*. Al-Karaki allowed him to retain his position because he cursed the first three Caliphs.⁴⁰

In Khorasan, the Safavids embarked on a reign of terror once more. Sunni 'Ulamā' and even poets were executed, such as the famous Mullah Banā'i. In Herat, Sunni 'Ulamā' who refused to submit to Shī'ism were slaughtered.⁴¹ Tombs of scholars were desecrated and entire cities massacred, such as the city of Qarshi whose entire population of 15,000 were killed for refusing Shī'ism.⁴²

Tome Pires, the Portuguese ambassador to China who visited Persia in 1511 noted the Safavid war against Sunni Islam:

'Ismā'īl protects our churches while destroys the houses of all Moors (Iberian term for Muslim) who follow the Sunnah of Muhammad.'⁴³

³⁸ Colin Turner, "The Rise of Religious Externalism in Safavid Iran", p. 28, 2000

³⁹ Rula Jurdi Abisaab, "Encyclopedia Iranica", Vol. 15, p. 544-547, 2010

⁴⁰ Nurullah al-Shushtari, "Majalis al-Mu'mineen", p. 233-4, 1354

⁴¹ Olivier Roy, "The Failure of Political Islam", p. 170, 1996

⁴² Colin P. Mitchell, "The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric", p.28, 2009

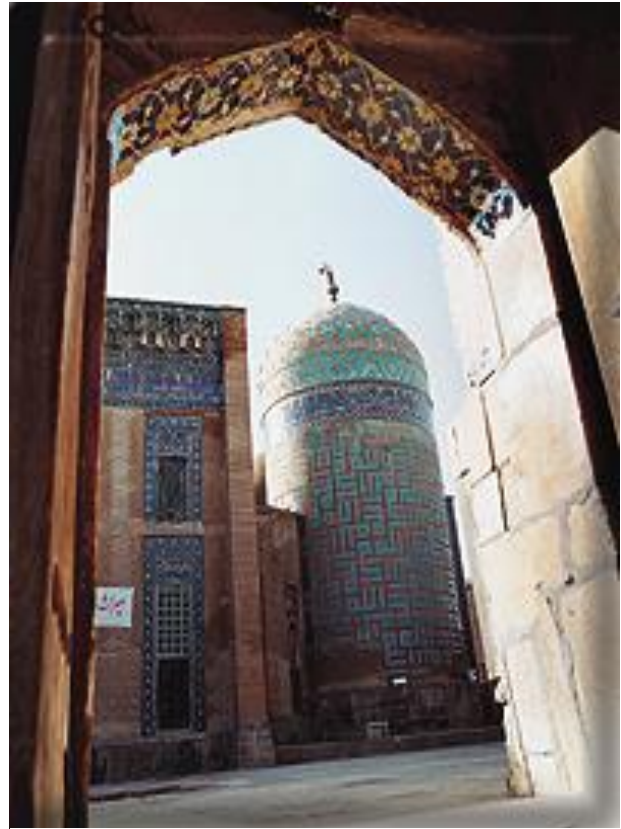
⁴³ David Yeroushalmi, "The Judeo-Persian Poet 'Emrani and his Book of Treasure", p. 20, 1987

What is clear is the contemporary and modern-day consensus on 'Ismā'īl I's state-sponsored persecution of Sunnis which was nothing less than a genocide: a deliberate and systematic targeting of the Sunni population of Iran with the intent of forcing them to adhere to another system of belief or face expulsion and death. The foundation of the Safavid state as being the "foundation of modern Iran" is also perplexing considering the appropriation that occurred by the Safavids in implanting a foreign religion and having Turkmen Qezelbāsh ruling over Persia as governors. Indeed, the Safavids were unable to cement Shī'ism in the minds of the Persian people as evidenced by the attempted resurgences of Sunni Islam under 'Ismā'īl I's grandson 'Ismā'īl II, under Nāder Shāh who was the first ruler of Persia after the collapse of the Safavid dynasty, and under the secular era of the Pahlavi dynasty of the 20th century which eventually succumbed to Shī'ism once more after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. And yet the "Islamic Revolution" ushered in by Ruhollah Khomeini has failed to win the hearts and minds of the Iranian people, instead having to enforce its rule and law by brutal force, signified by its ritual hanging of not only dissenters against the Iranian regime but also hanging religious Sunnis under the accusation of being "Wahhabi agitators".⁴⁴

⁴⁴ "Iran: Last Chance To Spare Lives Of Six Sunni Men On Death Row". Amnesty.org. N.p., 2015. Web. 28 July 2016.



Helmet of Farukh Yassar, his name is inscribed on it



The tomb of Šāfi al-Dīn Ardabīlī in Ardabil, Iran



Triumphal entrance of Šāh 'Ismā'īl I into Tabriz



A Qezelbash Standard-bearer



A Qezelbash Commander



Safavid coin minted during the reign of Shāh 'Ismā'īl I, it reads: La ilaha ila Allah, Muhammad al-Rasul Allah, 'Alī-un Wāli al-Allah (There is no God but God, Muhammad is his Messenger, 'Alī is the helper/friend of God)



Twelver Shī'ism is proclaimed the state religion of Persia

Ottoman Confrontation

As 'Ismā'īl I set about conquering Persia, he had specifically avoided confrontation with the growing power of the Ottoman Empire in the west. When 'Ismā'īl I crowned himself Shah in 1501, the then-Ottoman Sultān Bāyezīd II even congratulated him. The crimes and desecration of the Safavids could not be ignored by the Sunni Ottomans and yet they did not do much apart from set up greater defensive measures in Anatolia. It is reported that Bāyezīd II (r.1481-1512) merely warned 'Ismā'īl I against the desecrations but was unwilling to threaten or bring him to account.⁴⁵ Naturally, 'Ismā'īl I ignored Bāyezīd II and continued with his plans. Whether it was Bāyezīd II's wish to avoid war in the difficult terrain of eastern Anatolia or personal sympathies with the mystic dervish traditions of the Safavids, he was reluctant to confront 'Ismā'īl I except with “strongly worded letters”.

Yet even before the first wars between the Ottomans and Safavids, the seeds of conflict were already planted deep in Anatolia. As earlier noted, the Qezelbāsh Turkmen tribes were not only settled throughout Persia but their main tribal homelands were across Anatolia itself, much of them inside the Ottoman borders. Bāyezīd II had initiated a wave of resettlements of many of these tribes to the western provinces of the Ottoman Empire in 1502, passing a *firmān* that deported any person suspected of Safavid loyalties, mostly to provinces in Greece.⁴⁶ While this did not succeed entirely, as the Turkmen were nomadic and could evade capture, the deportations occurred on a large-enough scale for 'Ismā'īl I to write a letter to Bāyezīd II, imploring him to stop the deportations of his followers. This plea was, as expected, also ignored.

Bāyezīd II's restless and rebellious third son and future successor, Yavuz Selīm (“The Stern”) would take things a step further. In 1505, he launched a raid into Safavid territory, but this provoked only a small reaction from 'Ismā'īl I who was focusing on his conquests elsewhere.

⁴⁵ Kaveh Farrokh, “Iran at War: 1500-1988”

⁴⁶ H.R Roemer, Cambridge History of Iran, volume 6, p. 219, 1986

Selīm was infuriated by his father's complacency regarding what he saw as the greatest threat to the Ottoman Empire. In 1510 a Safavid army led by 'Ismā'īl I's own brother marched on Trabzon, but was soundly defeated by Selīm. To his shock, his father Bāyezīd II reprimanded him for this, further enraging Selīm who was already bitter for having to be the governor of what was considered an impoverished and resourceless backwater like Trabzon. He deserted the province that year, moving to his son Süleyman's (the future Sultan Süleyman) governorship at Feodosiya in the Crimea. This move was part of a mini civil war between Selīm and his brothers as they maneuvered to secure succession to the Ottoman throne. Meanwhile, events in Anatolia would take a turn that would confirm Selīm's fears and steer the future of the region on to another path.

In 1511, Bāyezīd II's eldest son Prince Korkut left his court in Antalya and moved to Manisa, to be closer to Istanbul and the political intrigues of the Sultan's court. However, this caused rumours to be spread that Bāyezīd II had died and the prince was proceeding to Istanbul. This caused a Turkmen Qezelbāsh rebellion to break out in the province of Teke, modern-day Antalya, as years of resentment and conflict with the Ottoman state had finally been unleashed. This rebellion was led by the pro-Safavid Karabıyıkoglu ("Blackbeard") Hasan Halife, who was also known as Şahquli, "Slave of the Shah". He had been on good terms with Bāyezīd II who had often sent him gifts and alms⁴⁷, but when the rumours of Bāyezīd II's death came, Şahquli announced himself as Caliph, successor to the Ottoman throne on behalf of 'Ismā'īl I. He was called Messiah, Prophet, the reincarnation of Ali and even God by many of his followers. They were mainly made up of deprived peasants who had little economic benefit from obedience to the Ottoman state and gladly supported this rebellion which gave them a cause and plunder.

With four and a half thousand followers, Şahquli raided the caravan of Prince Korkut, looting treasures and killing many of the Prince's Guard. Local troops who tried to repel the raid were forced back by the fanatical rebels. The Şahquli rebellion as it became known as, grew in number as Şahquli's victory over the heir-apparent of the Ottoman Empire enhanced his prestige. They continued to move through north Anatolia, burning down villages and killing at will.

⁴⁷ Caroline Finkel, "Osman's Dream", p.153, 2006

They were accused of destroying Qur'ans, mosques and dervish lodges. An Ottoman Sergeant who witnessed the ravaging of Anatolia by the rebellion reported that,

'They destroyed everything – men, women and children – and even sheep and cattle if there were too many for their needs; they destroyed cats and chickens. They looted all the possessions of the villages of Kütahya, their carpets and whatever they could find – and collected them up and burned them. Your servant, Sergeant Iskender witnessed this...'⁴⁸

The Ottomans dispatched armies led by the Prince Korkut as well as the Beylerbey Ahmet Pasha but were both defeated by Şahquli and his rebel force, the latter being captured and beheaded. These victories caused Şahquli's reputation to soar and he was seen as invincible, much like 'Ismā'īl I after his victories against the Shirvanshāhs and the Aġ Qoyunlu. These defeats forced Bāyezīd to dispatch an army led by one of his sons, Prince Ahmet, as well as the Grand Vizier, Hadım Ali Pasha. They cornered Şahquli near Kütahya but he escaped, and Hadım Ali pursued the rebels until they reached Sivas in eastern Anatolia and defeated him, but Hadım Ali was also killed. The remnants of the rebels continued to flee eastwards into Safavid territory, where 'Ismā'īl I was less than ambivalent, and had the leaders executed on charges such as treason and robbery. He then distributed the remaining fighting men amongst his army. The reason for this was that as Şahquli defied Ottoman power time and time again, he began to see himself as Messiah or God, and renounced support for 'Ismā'īl I.

However, the revolt of the Anatolian Qezelbāsh had only just begun. Rebellion spread across Anatolia and atrocities such as those perpetrated by the previous rebellion were conducted on a wider scale. 'Ismā'īl I chose to partake directly this time around, sending an army under Ali Khalifa in 1512, which penetrated deep into Anatolia and defeated several Ottoman armies. It seemed that Anatolia would be completely lost to the Safavid loyalists, and under pressure from his general's Bāyezīd abdicated the throne in favour of the general's favourite choice for heir – Selīm.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

By early 1513, Selīm I had outmanoeuvred and finally executed his male relatives so there was no dispute in the claim to the Ottoman throne. After years of seeing the Qezelbāsh rebellion in Anatolia threaten Ottoman rule, he was now in a position to confront this threat with the full might of the Ottoman state. He did this with ruthless efficiency. The Ottoman Grand Mufti passed a fatwa which declared the Qezelbāsh heretics and legitimised killing them. All Qezelbāsh supporters were registered, many were executed or exiled or imprisoned. But suppression was not enough, and Selīm I aimed to take the fight to the state benefactor of these rebellions: the Safavid state. He sealed off the border with Persia, cutting off 'Ismā'īl I's Qezelbāsh flow from Anatolia as well as preventing emissaries going to and from the Venetians regarding a possible alliance against the Ottoman Empire.

In 1514, Selīm I set off with his army from Istanbul and headed east. As the army proceeded, the Ottoman register which recorded all Qezelbāsh sympathisers was assiduously followed, and any suspected of sympathies were killed. Modern Alevi claims suggest up to 40,000 Qezelbāsh were killed in this great harrying of Anatolia. Many innocent Turkmen were caught up in this crushing of rebellion, but by-and-large the Qezelbāsh that were killed had been involved in brutal uprisings which threatened the Ottoman Empire's core territory.

Meanwhile, 'Ismā'īl I's intelligence quickly reported the huge Ottoman army marching towards him, and he quickly marshalled what forces he could. As the Ottoman army marched further eastwards, the Safavid forces applied scorched-earth tactics to try and starve the Ottomans, whose men relied on foraging from the land to keep up with food and water supplies. This Safavid tactic was also practiced when Selīm I marched on Diyarbakır, whose Safavid governor simply fled and the city's civilians promptly pledged allegiance to Selīm I. These scorched-earth tactics nearly caused the Ottoman army to mutiny and were only reassured when Ottoman intelligence reported that the Safavids were going to meet them in battle at Chaldiran. Selīm I hoped to goad 'Ismā'īl I into battle, by sending him mocking letters and declaring his disbelief. Here is an excerpt from one of Selīm I's letters to 'Ismā'īl I:

'It has been heard repeatedly that you have subjected the upright community of Muhammad (Prayers and salutations upon him!) to your devious will, that you have undermined the firm foundation of the Faith, that you have unfurled the banner of oppression in the cause of aggression, that you no longer uphold the commandments and prohibitions of the Divine Law, that you have incited your abominable followers to unsanctified sexual union and to the shedding of innocent blood, that—like they “Who listen to falsehood and practice what is unlawful” (Quran 5:42)—you have given ear to idle deceitful words and have partaken of that which is forbidden:

*He has laid waste to mosques, as it is said,
Constructing idol temples in their stead,*

that you have rent the noble fabric of Islam with the hand of tyranny, and that you have called the Glorious Qur'an the myths of the Ancients. The rumour of these abominations has caused your name to become like that of Harith deceived by Satan.

Indeed, as both the legal rulings of distinguished religious scholars who base their opinion on reason and tradition alike and the consensus of the Sunni community agree that the ancient obligation of extirpation, extermination, and expulsion of evil innovation must be the aim of our exalted aspiration, for “Religious zeal is a victory for the Faith of God the Beneficent:” then, in accordance with the words of the Prophet (Peace upon him!) “Whosoever introduces evil innovation into our order must be expelled” and “Whosoever does anything against our order must be expelled,” action has become necessary and exigent. Thus, when the Divine Decree of Eternal Destiny commended the eradication of the infamously wicked infidels into our capable hands, we set out for their lands like ineluctable fate itself to enforce the order “Do not leave a single unbeliever on the earth”(Quran 71:26).⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Feridun Bey, “Munsha'at”, volume 1, p. 382-383

Chaldiran

'Ismā'īl I had blundered because of his hubris, leaving the high ground in the city of Khoy and bringing his army down to the plains of Chaldiran. He did not listen to his experienced generals' advice regarding the Ottoman artillery and elite Janissary troops bearing firearms, numbering 500 and 12,000 respectively. He believed too strongly not only in the capability of the Safavid cavalry to penetrate the Ottoman artillery line but also in his invincibility and divine status that would grant him victory. When his generals advised him to charge the Ottoman army before it could set up appropriate defences for the cannons, he dismissed this, declaring, "I am not a caravanserai thief... Whatever is decreed by God will occur."

On August 23rd, 1514, the two armies prepared to face each other on the fields of Chaldiran. The Ottoman cannons were lined up and chained to each other to prevent penetration by the Safavid cavalry, and the elite Janissary troops, numbering 12,000 were placed behind the cannons. The number attributed to the size of the Ottoman Army is given anywhere between 40,000-80,000 troops, outnumbering 'Ismā'īl I's troops, estimated at not more than 40,000. Selīm I had chosen to occupy a hill nearby where he could observe the battle and give appropriate commands, while 'Ismā'īl I sat in the centre of his army. He possessed no artillery or guns.

The battle was opened by the thundering Ottoman cannons which rent holes in the Safavid lines and terrified both Safavid and Ottoman horses. 'Ismā'īl I himself led several charges against the Ottoman lines, reaching the Ottoman left flank and killing its commander Hassan Pasha. This blow demoralised the Ottoman troops there, but they were rallied by Sinan Pasha, another Ottoman commander, who led them to repel the Safavid advance. In the counterattack, the Ottoman succeeded in killing many of 'Ismā'īl I's generals and devastating his troops. Time and again 'Ismā'īl I led charges against the Ottoman centre, but each time the Ottoman juggernaut held firm against the fanatical Shamshir swords of the Safavid warriors, who were beaten back with heavy losses. Persian swords could not vie with the foreign and dreadful strength of Ottoman gunpowder.

The Safavid cavalry against many odds succeeded in reaching the Ottoman artillery lines and even shattered some of the chains to try and penetrate the line but were also beaten back. Sinan Pasha would deliver the final blow to the exhausted and cut-down Safavid army, leading a devastating charge from the Ottoman right flank which forced itself through the Safavid centre, rolling over the lines and reaching 'Ismā'īl I's camp. They plundered its treasures and even enslaved one of his wives, who was gifted to an Ottoman commander. With heavy losses, most of their top generals killed and 'Ismā'īl I's camp plundered, the Safavid army broke and routed. 'Ismā'īl I retreated to a hill, sounding the call of retreat with his flute. Here the losses became apparent: only 300 Qezelbāsh rallied to him, and together they fled.

Two weeks later, Selīm I marched into the Safavid capital Tabriz, where another of 'Ismā'īl I's wives was also enslaved. Yet Selīm I did not annex the city and left just over a week later to return to Istanbul. With winter on the horizon, a barren land condemned to the Safavid scorched-earth tactics and over-stretched supply lines constantly harassed by Safavid cavalry meant Selīm I could not possibly hope to keep his army campaigning. The Ottomans annexed Diyarbakır and much of eastern Anatolia on the way, land the Safavid state would never recover. The victory at Chaldiran was bittersweet. Safavid ambitions to expand into Anatolia and Syria were permanently halted, but continued Ottoman inability to campaign into Persia solidified Safavid rule in the Iranian Plateau, and allowed them to continue the Shī'i propagation at the expense of the Sunni population.

As for 'Ismā'īl I, things would never be the same. His aura of invincibility was shattered by this defeat. His army was destroyed, large tracts of land were irreversibly lost and his favourite wives were enslaved, but Chaldiran more importantly meant that 'Ismā'īl I was mortal. Indeed, after Chaldiran he never mustered the willpower to fight another major battle. He increasingly turned to hunting, physical pleasures and particularly wine. This state of affairs would last until 1524, when he died at the young age of 36. He succumbed to fever after a hunting expedition, dying in Tabriz in May. Even though Safavid Persia would continually be threatened by the Ottomans or Uzbeks, military affairs were relegated to officers and his heirs.



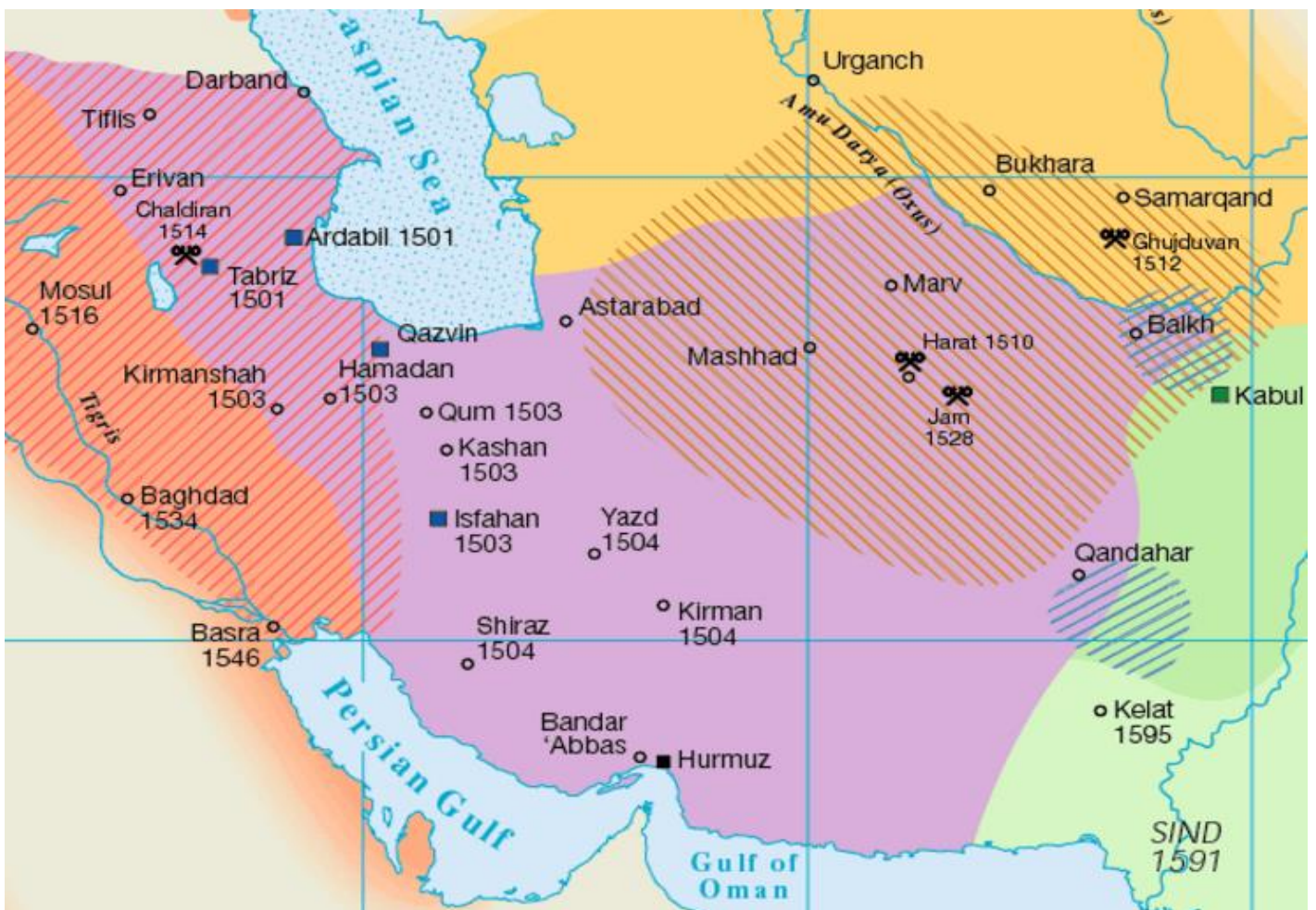
Ottoman cannons facing the Safavid cavalry at Chaldiran



The site of Chaldiran



The Gunpowder Empires



Borders of Safavid Persia and dates of conquest

The Later Safavid State

The Qezelbāsh threat in Anatolia had not entirely receded after Selīm I, and the Ottoman Empire would have to fight successive wars (seven in total) against the Safavid state over its lifetime. But none would ever threaten the Safavid hold of Iran, merely demarcating borders between Sunni Ottoman territory and Shī'i Safavid territory. On May 29 1555, Sultan Süleyman signed a treaty with Shāh Tahmāsb called the Peace of Amasya, which came after an extended war lasting through 1532-1555. Not only was Shāh Tahmāsb forced to stop the ritual cursing of the three Caliphs, which was humiliating, but the border between the Safavid and Ottoman empires was demarcated, a line that would be roughly followed between Iraq and Iran to the modern day. This caused ramifications such as encouraging conflict between Saddam's Iraq and the newly-named Islamic Republic of Iran.

However, significant forms of internal resistance against the Shī'i doctrine of the state manifested itself over the years, in the form of 'Ismā'īl I's grandson, 'Ismā'īl II, and the first Shāh of Persia after the deposition of the Safavid State, Nāder Shāh. 'Ismā'īl II came to power 1576 and he immediately set about reversing the Shī'i policies his father and grandfather had made the identity of the Safavid state. He had been imprisoned by his father Shāh Tahmāsb on accounts of treason, but his loyal Qezelbāsh supporters killed his brother Haydar Mīrzā and released him from jail, supporting his accession to the Safavid throne. His Sunni sympathies manifested after he ascended the throne. He was aided and probably inspired by his newly-appointed Sunni Şadr Mīrzā Makhdum Al-Sharifi. Al-Sharifi had been chief judge in Fars before moving to the Safavid capital Qazvin (adopted after the sacking of Tabriz by the Ottomans), and gained crowds of followers as he preached Sunni thought.⁵⁰ This showed that the Safavid conversion of Persia had not occurred overnight, and that Sunni sentiments were still strong three-quarters of a century after 'Ismā'īl I tried to wipe Sunni thought out. The Persian people would not easily abandon their religion even when faced with expulsion or the sword. 'Ismā'īl II had the ritual cursing of the three Caliphs and 'Ā'isha abolished.

⁵⁰ Andrew J. Newman, *"Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire"*, p. 46, 2008

He also tried to do away with the names of the Twelve Imams on Safavid coinage, but this plan was fruitless. This was too much for the disappointed Qezelbāsh, and in 1577 he died of poisoning in a plot fermented by the Qezelbāsh and his sister Parī Khān Khānum, who was instrumental in his succession but was against his pro-Sunni policy. Al-Sharifi narrowly escaped assassination and fled to the Ottoman Empire. 'Ismā'īl II's brother Khudābanda succeeded him as Shāh, and under him Khudābanda and his son Shāh Abbās the Shī'i identity of the state was re-asserted and re-applied with more vigour, to the extent that it was under their reign where Shī'ism became the religion of the majority.

The later Nāder Shāh (r.1736–1747) also attempted to institute a pro-Sunni policy, deposing the Safavid Shāh Abbas III and supplanting the Safavid state with his own empire. He followed 'Ismā'īl II's path in banning vilification of the three Caliphs and other Shī'i innovations. He tried to counter the Qezelbāsh by creating his own symbolic headwear, the *kolah-e Naderi*. It bore 4 peaks symbolising the four Caliphs. He had the Shī'i Ṣadr strangled and made overtures to the Ottoman Empire to try and get the "Ja'fari" madhhab, a blend of Shi'a and Sunni ideals (without the offenses) accepted by the Ottoman Empire. They rejected this, but allowed Persian pilgrims to perform the Hajj. Both Nāder Shāh and 'Ismā'īl II had a vested interest in reviving Sunni thought as the Shī'a clergy had grown large and meddling, having significant power both spiritually and temporally with large tracts of land under their control. Both Shāhs also sought to reconcile with the Ottoman Empire in some form, as Persia was a Shī'i island in a Sunni sea, surrounded by the Ottomans, Mughals and Uzbeks, all of whom were Sunni.

And yet, by this time the Shī'a clergy's roots had become too deep. Both Shāhs would die and the clergy remained, quickly re-asserting their authority and using the Qezelbāsh forces to re-implement the Shī'i ideology. The power of the clergy would be challenged finally by the secular Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), but were overthrown in the Iranian Revolution in 1979, whose head was the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who once more revived the supremacy of the Shī'i clergy in Iran.

Repeating the past?

To conclude, it is hard to state the impact of these events on the modern era. The forceful adoption of Shī'ism has made Persia, or Iran – insular. It is surrounded by neighbours who are hostile in faith, and this has caused an aggressive approach by Iran in regards to its foreign policy. Much of the conflict today exists along the Sunni-Shī'i axis, the latter whose main representative and funder is Iran who has essentially co-opted most forms of Shī'ism, propagating its own unique version which was heavily moulded by the Safavid Shāhs and clerics.

Iran has also sought to expand its “Islamic revolution” by claiming to fight for all the oppressed Muslims in the region, yet has exclusively focused on funding Shī'ite militias that have supplanted the state in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and increasingly dividing Syria. Essentially, half of the Middle East is in a period of destabilisation where hundreds of thousands have been killed, and tens of millions displaced. In retaliation, Sunnis have increasingly labelled Iran as being a neo-Safavid state which follows the older Safavid ambition of expanding Shī'ism across the Muslim world. It is a claim not entirely unfounded considering statements made by Iranian officials in regards to cities like Baghdad coupled with heavy Iranian rhetoric against Saudi Arabia and their management of the Hajj. Such questioning is not light rhetoric, as legitimacy for the Kingdom lies heavily on its patronage of the pilgrimage and can be considered in an Islamic understanding of international relations to be a form of sovereignty for whatever entity governs the Hejaz, and for it to be questioned is aggressive posturing.

Whatever the case, it is prudent that all actors take lessons from the past, whether it is the Sunni states who wish to understand Iran's seemingly contradictory statements and actions in the Middle East, or Iran who assumes that unceasing proliferation of militia terrorism will not generate a backlash from the Sunni peoples. Who is to say that another Yavuz Selīm will not rise?

Glossary

Adhān	The Islamic call to prayer which is called from the mosque 5 times a day.
Ahl al-Bayt	The family and lineage of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.
Dār al-Islām	“Land of Islam”, referring to the land under the rule of Islam – where Muslims are dominant.
Da'wah	Proselytization of Islam.
Dervish	Sufi ascetic focusing on extreme austerity and remembrance of God through physical practices.
Farr	Literally, “glory”. The Persian ideology of the divine right of Kings (to rule).
Firmān	Royal decree issued by the Ottoman Sultan.
Fuqahā'	Islamic Jurist.
Ġāzī	Arabic term referring to the one partaking in a raiding expedition (<i>gazw</i>), and a holy warrior of Islam.
Ghulāt	Literally, “exaggerators”, extremists who go beyond the pale of Islam into heresy.
Ghuluww	Concept of exaggeration.
Hadeeth	Narrations from the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Jihād	Religious duty of the Muslims to wage war in defense of their religion.
Khān	Mongol-Turkic title for ruler.
La'an	To curse.
Madāris	Plural for “Madrasa”, an Islamic school.
Murīd	A Sufi student who pledges allegiance to a Murshid to follow him in a spiritual path of cleansing.
Murshid	A spiritual guide of a Sufi order. It is his duty to guide his students on the Sufi path.
Najas	Literally, “impure”.
Qezelbāsh	Militant Turkmen tribes who adopted the Shī'i faith, inhabiting the lands of Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Anatolia.
Quraysh	The tribe of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that inhabited Makka, latter accepting Islam and spearheading its rapid expansion.
Razzias	A term borrowed from Algerian by the French, latinized from “Ghaziya” – to raid.
Şadr	The highest religious authority in the land, only answerable to the Shāh himself.
Şafawīyya	Initially a Sufi order that became militant, and then founded a state in Persia.

Shāfi‘ī	A school of jurisprudence in the Muslim faith.
Shāh	The Persian word for “King”.
Shaykh	An honorific title denoting respect, wisdom, or for a ruler of a tribe, or for religious knowledge.
Shī‘ism	A sect that initially started due to political differences in the Muslim community, but eventually evolved into a religion of its own.
Shirvanshāh	Title for the rulers of Shirvan in Azerbaijan. Literally, “King of Shirvan”.
Ṣūfī	Practitioner of Sufism, striving for spiritual purity and <i>ihsan</i> – purity of worship.
Sultān	Initially an abstract term for authority in Arabic, eventually evolving to be a title for the Ruler.
Sunni	A Muslim who strives to follow the ways of the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.
Tabarā‘īyān	Qezelbash gangs that roamed the streets in Persia, enforcing Shī‘ite rites and making sure Sunnis could not dissent.
Tafseer	Literally, “Exegesis”. Critical interpretation of either Quran or Hadeeth.
‘Ulamā’	A body of religious scholars recognised as the highest religious authority.
Ummah	The Muslim nation.
Wājib	Literally, “obligatory”.

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